

# Searching for joy held a lot of heartbreak

By Leslie Scrivener  
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Two young Toronto women were working on their first film, about the celebration of joy, when one lost her job, the other separated from her husband and both their fathers died of heart attacks.

In short, their search for joy was riddled with heartache.

Making a film was risky enough since both were novices — they had never worked a camera, never directed, never edited, never written a script and didn't know anybody in the movie business.

Isabel Frysberg is an occupational therapist. Tracy Thomson has worked in children's theatre and earns her living as a waitress. Both are Toronto raised, met at a part time-film class at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute and for this interview — in Frysberg's Annex apartment, cheery with fresh daisies on the kitchen table and warm cider on the stove — are surprisingly serious.

Joy, Frysberg explains later, is spontaneous.

Not surprisingly, their losses added a layer of poignancy to the film, *In Search of Joy*, which will be broadcast on CBC television Jan. 15 on the program *Canadian Reflections*.

"We had theories that pain was the underside of joy, but we were afraid to ask people about it," says Frysberg. "This was our first film and we didn't want people to feel bad. But the message we got was how can you experience joy without addressing pain and loss?"

When their filming was completed, fate intervened.

They had their interviews with

local free spirits: Dr. Hugh Morgan Hill, known as Brother Blue, a storyteller-preacher bedecked in balloons and butterflies; Spirit, a young artist who dances in her wheelchair, her blonde hair flying as she whirls and turns; Sadie Jordan, who recalls her mother telling her 76 years ago, "This is what you are to me, a jewel, a joy, a gem, a treasure," and a romantic Bloor St. baker, Pasquale Zappia who says he "falls in love with the dough."

They had their joyful music, Klezmer and Celtic and African. They had their shots of people having a good time. They photographed people at the Exhibition, at Kensington market, playing in a pile of leaves and eating food with gusto. They filmed children, full of childhood's natural wonder.

Despite all this, they felt something was missing. Then Thomson's father, Jim, died. He was a defenceman for the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team for 10 years in the '40s and '50s, a time when the Leafs won six Stanley Cups. Later he ran a fuel company.

Five weeks later Joseph Frysberg died, in circumstances uncannily similar. Both men collapsed in the bathrooms of their homes. Both were found by their wives and both died of heart attacks.

Joseph Frysberg was a building contractor. A Polish Jew, he walked to Uzbekistan where he lived hand to mouth during the war. His wife Sarah spent the war in a Siberian labor camp.

Their daughters had not intended to be in the film, but their fathers' deaths changed the way they looked at the world. "We're only here for a short while,

folks," says Frysberg, 35. "Life is short, wake up. Tell people you care about them."

"None of this is new," adds Thomson, 29. "It's because it happened to us. We had to tell the full story."

So, in touching and melancholy sequences, the women, both dark haired, solemn and lovely, face the camera and talk about their fathers.

"You realize the big things are life and death," says Frysberg. "It made us live more fully. I also wanted the film to have a spiritual quality, to be able to see the invisible and believe in the potential within us, acknowledging God's presence without being religious."

She says we forget the simple pleasures in life — one of her joys is playing the fiddle and Klezmer music. As an occupational therapist, she found that those pleasures can sometimes be the key to a patient's recovery. "When people are suffering depression, emotional pain, economic losses, the thing thrown out the window is the source of happiness. My job is to help them to get back to work or find new work and it's hard to motivate people unless you can wake them up to something that makes them feel good."

Frysberg learned not long after her father's death that she was being laid off — she's since been reinstated. Thomson's marriage broke up when they started shooting. "If you can hang on to who you are, trust yourself and tap into your own joy in the midst of all these changes and transitions — that's what the film deals with," she says.



RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

**FILM MAKERS** Tracy Thomson, left, and Isabel Frysberg: How can you experience joy without facing pain?

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